

THE COLOR OF TRIUMPH

In 1884, a somewhat unexpected and fortuitous event created for the ilustrado his golden theater. That year, two Filipino painters bagged top honors at Madrid's *Exposicion Nacional de Bellas Artes*. Juan Luna's painting *Spoliarium* took the first of three gold medals, and Felix Resurreccion Hidalgo's *Las Jovenes Cristianas Expuestas al Populacho* gained ninth of 15 silver medals. The Filipino community in Madrid was ecstatic. When no medal of honor was announced, they vociferously speculated that this was only because the racially biased judges had begrudged having to confer the ultimate honor on Juan Luna, an *Indio*.

The budding Propaganda Movement had seized upon a talisman to spotlight the Filipino image. The Filipino Indio had bearded the Spanish lion in his own den. Here was incontrovertible proof, attested to by Spain's cultural gurus themselves, that the Filipinos could excel among *insulares* at their own game. Such was the prism through which the ilustrados viewed the artistic triumph of Luna and Hidalgo. The signal recognition gained by the duo was utilized to demolish the malicious myth spread by Hispanic zealots that the Filipino was genetically and racially incapable of any cultural achievement. Here was the perfect squelch to all those loud voices out to

marginalize the natives Filipinas of the Philippines (the archipelago-born Spaniards and mestizos included) to a permanent inferior status.

Within the context of European culture, Luna and Hidalgo showcased the coming of age of the Filipino. That special spark that ignited nationalist pride had not come from the combative pens and belligerent tongues of warrior wordsmiths, but rather from the highly skilled brushes of two painters. So it came to pass that what had been perceived as a politically harmless profession acquired *filibustero* overtones overnight.

Both Juan Luna and Felix Resurreccion Hidalgo were products of Manila's *Academia de Dibujo y Pintura* under the tandem stewardship of a peninsular (Agustin Saez) and an *hijo del pais* (Lorenzo Rocha). The *Academia* was established only in 1850, though it had roots in Damian Domingo's first art school in 1821. Painting as an art form was not practiced prior to Hispanization. Even under Spanish domain, apart from early anonymous religious painters, the fine art of painting gained sophisticated roots only later, in the second half of the 19th century, and swiftly blossomed with the international acclaim attained by Luna and Hidalgo. Their international artistic recognition remains unsurpassed by subsequent artists to this day.



Luna and Hidalgo were not the first Filipino artists to take advanced studies in Spain. Some years before, two Filipino artists on government pensions, Esteban Villanueva and Melecio Figueroa, preceded them. As students of Madrid's renowned *Academia de San Fernando*, both Luna and Hidalgo mastered the historical painting style of the European Salons known as the "Grand Manner." It was the entrenched academic style of painting of the era. The artist focused on a classical period of European history, basically Roman or Greek, to dramatize some momentous event in a highly figurative manner, rich with detail, on a very large canvas. The more intellectual painters made use of allegory to spell out the current political condition.

Some years earlier, at the *Academia* in Manila, both Luna and Hidalgo had been instructed in a painting style which, for lack of a better label, could be called *tipos del pais*. The artist depicted everyday scenes that typified

the country: vendors, students, mestizas, rural landscapes and other such genre. It took both artists a good number of years at the *Academia* in Madrid – followed by a journey to Italy to take in at firsthand all those Roman architectural relics – to master the Academic salon's historical style. Luna's winning entry *Spoliarium* was directly inspired by long visits to Rome's famous Colosseum.

While history has paired these two artists, their personalities were, in fact, as different as sea and sky. Coming from a wealthy *mestizo de sangley* family from Binondo, Manila, Felix Resurreccion Hidalgo was born on February 21, 1853. He took up law studies at the University of Santo Tomas where he was somehow implicated in the anti-friar student activity of 1869 that led to the brief incarceration of its suspected leader, Felipe Buencamino. It was a time of political tension fueled by a raging racist conflict within the clergy between seculars (Filipinos) and regulars (Spanish). The garroting of Gomburza was just around the corner. Pulled by a stronger interest in the arts (and arguably also to avoid political persecution after the incident), Hidalgo, despite having successfully passed the exams to become a lawyer, enrolled at the *Academia de Dibujo y Pintura*. Here, he impressed the academy's director, Agustin Saez, and he subsequently gained a *pensionado* scholarship to pursue further studies in Spain.

Full years at the Manila *Academia* had provided Hidalgo (who signed his canvases "Resurreccion" at the time, hinting at his concern about being in the friar watchlist) with solid grounding. He was confident enough to exhibit his works at the *Teatro Circo de Bilibid* in 1876, a choice few of which were then sent to the U.S. among those representing the Philippines in the Universal Exposition in Philadelphia that same year. By the time Hidalgo attended Madrid's *Academia* in 1879, there was nothing new in that academy's curricula to challenge his previous training. "Be fully assured," he wrote his friends in Manila (Rizal and Anson), "that you can take these courses under Don Agustin [Saez], and they are exactly the same as taught here, no more and no less, with the difference that there, you paint and draw with far greater comfort than we do here ..." (Roces, 1998, p. 108). To his mother, he complained that "... all my time at the classes is spent perennially doing the same arid stuff " (p. 105).

Nevertheless, throughout the years, he persisted with the demands of the salon so that, by 1884, his efforts were rewarded with the silver medal for *Las Jovenes Cristianas Expuestas al Populacho*. By then, he had fulfilled his dream of moving to Paris.

Hidalgo's prize-winning entry showed a pair of young Christian maidens, naked and bound in a corner of a huge stone edifice, subjected to the gaze of the Roman rabble whose lecherous intentions are obvious. "*Las Jovenes Cristianas* of the distinguished Filipino artist captures the admiration of the people for the discreet manner in which the nudes are treated and the shamefaced modesty in which they shield themselves from the lascivious and filthy gaze of the populace," commented the newspaper *El Porvenir*. This prizewinning work was subsequently acquired by the Spanish Government by Royal Order for a sum that Hidalgo angrily and disdainfully called a "laughable" (Roces, 1998, p. 117) 2,500 pesetas.



Felix Resurreccion-Hidalgo's better known companion, Juan Luna, was born in Badoc, Ilocos Norte, on October 23, 1857. He trained for a naval career after completing his bachelor of arts at the Ateneo de Manila. However, his keen interest in the arts caused him to abandon this profession and enrol at Manila's *Academia* studying under Lorenzo Guerrero, the Indio painter in charge of Indio students. Apparently unhappy at the *Academia*, he moved to Madrid's *Academia de San Fernando* in 1877, two years ahead of Hidalgo. There, one of the professors, Alejo de Vera, a noted painter, took him under his wing to assist in commissioned work in Italy. By 1881, Luna had distinguished himself through a historical piece entitled *The Death of Cleopatra* which earned him second prize at the National Exposition of Fine Arts in Madrid. Three years later, the gold medal award for *Spoliarium* cemented his fame.

Physically colossal in keeping with the grand spectacle in paint, Luna's canvas spanned 7.75 meters and stood 4.25 meters high. *Spoliarium*'s drama occurs backstage of the Roman amphitheater where a stream of carcasses of defeated gladiators are dragged like butchered meat out of the sunlit arena

of combat and into the shadow-shrouded bowels of the Colosseum. Two toga-clad old men hover expectantly like vultures on one side, waiting to drink fresh human blood to rejuvenate them. "In that far from mute canvas," observed Rizal spinning full throttle with eloquence, "you can hear the frenzy of the crowds, the howl of the slaves, the metallic clang of armor on corpses, the sobs of orphans, and the murmur of prayers, with as much force and realism as is heard in the crash of thunder amid the roar of cataracts" (Rizal, 1961, *Escritos Politicos*, pp. 20-21). Luna's triumph gained him an audience with King Alfonso XII. His painting was subsequently purchased by the Provincial Committee of Barcelona in 1886 for 20,000 pesetas.



Both Luna and Hidalgo subsequently lived in Paris for most of their adult lives. Thirty-three years passed before Hidalgo returned to the Philippines in 1912; and even then he stayed less than a year, sailing back to Europe to die in Barcelona on March 12, 1913. Luna was away 17 years. Rizal (to Canon, May 2, 1889) observed of Luna's progeny: "... when I take in my arms the son of Luna and Pacita Pardo; he is one Frenchman more and one Filipino less" (Rizal, 1961b, p. 364). Although Luna opted to return to the Philippines in 1894, he was back in Paris three years later and died in Hong Kong in 1899.

Having set up their studios as distinguished painters in Paris, neither painter used his brush to make specific political statements concerning the Philippines. Luna did work on ink-wash illustrations for Rizal's planned new edition of *Noli Me Tangere*, but this edition did not go to press. On the other hand, Hidalgo, acting on the suggestion of Regidor, painted a gigantic and daring canvas entitled *La Iglesia Contra el Estado* which recorded the historic murder of Governor-General Bustamante by friars, but this opus was never exhibited in his lifetime.

In fact, Luna painted several versions of a commissioned work showing España and Filipinas as two young maidens marching arm in arm up flower-strewn steps towards the light, the allegory being that España was guiding Filipinas to some bright dawn of progress. Hidalgo, in turn, while cold to the

Spanish colonizer, worked in the early years of the American period on a mural that painted the United States, the stars and stripes unfurled behind her, as some female beacon of liberty for Filipinas who looks up at her to offer an olive branch.

The bona fides of these two artists place them in the context of the ilustrados in Spain during the Propaganda Movement. Their personal backgrounds reveal them as true nationalists, yes, but artists first and foremost. Painters who happened to be Filipinos, they achieved professional recognition at the right time in the right place. Actually, it was their propagandizing *kababayans* who hijacked their personal triumphs for nationalist-*flibustero* ends.